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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast the role of teachers' unions in three high schools located in different school districts in California. The cases and subsequent discussion were derived from analysis of data from in-depth interviews with teachers, administrators, and union leaders. Questions focused on issues of teachers' levels of involvement and attitudes toward the local teachers' organization. Each school encompassed the full range of commitment to teachers' unions, including: (1) those who have chosen not to contribute or participate in any way; (2) teachers whose involvement is minimal, intermittent, or ambivalent; and (3) those whose commitment to the union is consistent and strong. Although economic issues may have the greatest social significance for teachers, unions have recently become involved in forging new cooperative relationships with administrators and school boards in promoting a wave of local teaching reforms such as: site-based decision making to increase teacher participation in school governance; peer assistance, coaching, and evaluation; and teacher determination of training needs and professional development opportunities. (39 references) (LL)

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TEACHERS' UNIONS AND NOTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

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April 1991

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TEACHERS' UNIONS AND NOTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

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> We share a task: working with kids. There is a brotherhood, a sisterhood, whatever the particular non-sexist term is now for that kind of goings-on. And I look and say ok, who are the people who are on the other side? -- A social studies teacher, formerly at Rancho High School

> I just feel, and maybe it's selfish in some ways, that I don't need the union. -- An economics teacher at Onyx Ridge High School

> I guess I joined [the union], I felt I wasn't doing my share, I'm not part of the majority here and maybe I should do more. Although I haven't taken advantage of any of the perks that come with union membership, there may be a degree of comfort in having them. That was not paramount. I don't even think I know what they are...It's a conscience thing. -- A science teacher at Oak Valley High School

Teachers' unions typically have been perceived as being of interest to teachers solely in terms of economic protections or gains (McDonnell & Pascal, 1988; Urban, 1982). As these comments by teachers at three secondary schools in three different school districts reveal, however, there may be social and practical dimensions to teachers' union commitment as well. Teachers may recognize these organizations as means of protecting practice from outside infringement, or as the manifestation of their commitment to others, as well as the providers of economic benefits.

Over the past twenty-five years, as teachers' unions increasingly have become a common feature of school district life, they largely have been criticized for what is seen as the

establishment of an inappropriate form of local discourse. The literature is rife with assertions that union presence effectively reduces potentially important educational decisions to economic considerations (Carlson, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Kerchner & Mitchell, 1986), reinforces bureaucratic conceptions of teaching (Johnson, 1984; Kerchner, 1979; Mitchell & Kerchner, 1983; Simpkins, McCutcheon, & Alec, 1979; Williams, 1979) and perpetuates a fundamentally adversarial relationship between teachers and others (Jessup, 1985; Johnson, 1987; Kerchner & Mitchell, 1986). While many researchers contend that unions encourage a perception of teachers as a laboring class, however, a smaller number contend that their presence is necessary because of the fundamental inequities inherent in educational authority relations (see Freedman, 1987; Larson, 1977; Malloy, 1987; Matlock, 1987; Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Swanson, 1987; Sykes, 1986, 1987; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

Relatively recently, educational scholars have begun to question a number of the social and organizational assumptions that have long been the basis of much of the research on teaching. Their analyses describe teaching as a complex and diverse enterprise and not readily generalizable. As organizations, schools and districts constitute a diversity of administrative arrangements, policy influences, resource capacities, professional development opportunities, and normative environments (Ball, 1987; Clune, 1990; Little, 1990a; Louis, 1990; McLaughlin, Talbert & Phelan, 1990). For teachers working

within these organizations, grade level, subject area, programmatic specialty, student group, and extracurricular professional activities may engender complex and varied conceptions of role, agendas, and identities (Bacharach & Mitchell, 1981; Johnson, 1990a, 1990b; Lichtenstein, McLaughlin & Knudsen, forthcoming; Metz, 1990; Siskin, 1991; Talbert, 1991).

The dismantling of the "black box" of teaching renders problematic the notion of a generic or uniform evaluation of unions by teachers. Teachers may perceive union presence and membership differently in the context of their particular experiences and values. (Bacharach & Mitchell, 1981; Johnson, 1984; Urban, 1990). In the presence of other local issues and features, union presence may appear minimal or highly salient. For some teachers, union strategies may have significant effect on working conditions and union commitment may provide a major source of professional identity, while for others, union presence and membership may appear entirely separate or irrelevant.

One way to appraise the value of unions for teachers across roles and settings is to exchange organizational and economic perspectives for considerations of unions in the context of teachers' professional communities -- in particular, to assess how teachers' organizations reflect, contribute to, or stand in contrast with teachers' professional needs and values as they are locally understood.

The notion of professional community considered here is an elaboration of the concept of "occupational community" developed

by occupational sociologists to distinguish how organizational theorists define occupational groups, in bureaucratic or rational terms, from the ways occupational groups identify themselves, on the basis of their "collegial or communal ties" (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Where occupational communities are formed by individuals who consider themselves to be engaged in the same "work," professional communities are groups whose basis may lie in beliefs of mutual support of the same broad endeavor. In this way, teachers might recognize not only other teachers but administrators, school staff, parents, or students as members of their professional communities. Given a narrower conception of task, teachers might find relevant commonality on the basis of particular categories of work: English teachers, for example, might perceive important distinctions between their own professional purposes and needs and those of math teachers.

Professional communities might reflect formal organizational categories or boundaries or supersede them. They might be rooted in frequent contact and work of interdependent nature, or merely signify members' awareness of others engaged in parallel enterprises across some distance. They may be formed by the common patterns of interaction of many members or reflect the idiosyncratic movements and preferences of individuals. Teachers' professional communities diverge in form and composition because they are <u>socially constructed</u> (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) by members on the basis of shared experiences and understandings.

Occupational communities are understood to be centered on work and the values and identification that emerge from the undertaking of that work, extending out to form the basis for members' other social relations (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). As professional communities are explored in this paper, there are no assumptions about the pervasiveness of teachers' interactions though the breadth and depth of those affiliations are assessed. The nature of teacher interactions may be limited or fragmented, with clear demarcations between "purely social" relationships -- the "casual camaraderie of the staff room . . . at some distance from the classroom" (Little, 1990b) -- or "purely professional" -- the kind of task-oriented coordination of lesson plans and materials which occurs in some academic departments. Conversely, teachers may find opportunities for more complex relationships which reflect social, pragmatic, and intellectual concerns.

The potential complexity of teachers' interactions suggests that it is more appropriate to consider the possibility of simultaneous membership in several professional communities. A high school teacher, for example, could find sources of intellectual and social identity in an academic department as well as in the larger school or district. Organizationally structured opportunities for interaction, as well as local norms and values, however, are likely to suggest the local prominence of certain forms of community over others. Encountering and interacting with community characteristics, teachers' unions may

serve as a general locus for community membership, perform a valued but well-bounded function, or miss the point entirely.

The sections that follow contrast the role of teachers' unions in three high schools in three different California school districts. In each case, efforts are made to assess the interaction between the union and other features of the primary professional community. While they describe only three of many possible professional community configurations, by providing contrasting examples they reveal what may be some critical features of teachers' professional communities.

This study is part of a larger research effort by the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching and is one of several attempts to identify the consequences of professional communities for teachers' commitment and performance (see also Lichtenstein, McLaughlin & Knudsen, forthcoming; Little, forthcoming; Siskin, 1991). High schools represent special settings for exploring teachers' professional communities: secondary teachers' subject-specific orientations suggest a variety of possible organizationally structured opportunities for interaction, including academic departments and external reference groups across school and district boundaries. This study also employs data from, and benefits from analyses conducted under the auspices of, other studies in the same districts, notably several efforts by the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and an assessment of changes in union-management relations (Lieberman & Bascia, 1990).

The cases and subsequent discussion are derived from the analysis of in-depth interview data with teachers, administrators, and union leaders. In each school, approximately a dozen interviews focused on issues of teachers' levels of involvement and attitudes toward the local teachers' organization. Approximately two dozen interviews with teachers at each school were carefully analyzed for contextual information on school and district history, organization, norms, and salient issues.

Each school encompasses the full range of teacher commitment to the teachers' union: teachers who have chosen not to contribute or participate in any way, teachers whose involvement is minimal, intermittent, or ambivalent, and teachers whose commitment to the union appears consistent and strong. Even at Rancho[1], for example, where very few teachers reported to school during a one-day walk-out, one of them can claim that "my level of involvement is about zero." Even at Onyx Ridge, where the Teachers' Association has minimal salience, a math teacher's "family is union, and [my commitment] was just never a decision."

In some respects, union commitment can be understood in terms of the personal values and histories which teachers "bring to" current situations. Some teachers, like the math teacher at Onyx Ridge, are perpetuating family values. For others, an incident which occurred early in a teaching career can serve as the formative basis for an established position: for an Oak

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2. Schools have been given pseudonyms.

Valley teacher, the presence of a "militant, aggressive union" in the first district where she taught is the reason why, despite her acknowledged ignorance of local labor relations, she "doesn't see unions as being a positive force." These personal attributes and interpretations notwithstanding, however, the three schools provide divergent examples of how teachers' evaluations of their local organizations emerge from and contribute to the formation of their primary professional communities.

Rancho High School

At Rancho, teachers' identification group consists of other teachers across the district. Many teachers of long tenure share a common history, having taught together in other schools before Rancho opened fourteen years ago. Teachers' commitment to the Teachers' Association is also of long standing: district membership rates were over 90% even before collective bargaining was established in 1976.

The delineation of boundaries of the professional community falls along hierarchical lines: teachers have long perceived district administration as making policy decisions that affect teachers' work without sufficient information or expertise and undermining teachers' appropriate authority. The district's tendency to recruit for administrative positions outside the district limits teachers' local career options, exacerbates distinctions between teachers and administrators, and intensifies teachers' professional identities in standard occupational terms.

The Teachers' Association and district have each contributed to the conflict between teachers and district administrators and to the strong identification of teachers with the Teachers' Association: teachers find themselves in general agreement with the Association's militant rhetoric, perceiving parallels between the district's public hostility toward the union and its generally "disrespectful" attitude toward teachers. Likewise, the Teachers' Association's perpetual demand for increases in teachers' salaries benefits, and the district's resistance to comply, are seen as consonant with other instances where the district has not met teachers' professional needs, including the loss of school counselors and release time for department chairs, shrinking opportunities for professional development, and the inadequacy of classroom materials. At Rancho, the history of district labor relations is considered a crucial part of new teachers' socialization: an English teacher remembers how "last year when we had the [walk-out], as younger teachers came in, they were quite starry-eyed and we old veterans sat down and explained this long history of things to them."

At times, Teachers' Association rhetoric has been an effective force on teacher sentiment; at other times, faculty sentiment has been strong enough that teachers felt the union was not doing enough. An overwhelming majority of the district's teachers staged a wildcat "sick-out" when they felt the Teachers' Association was not moving quickly enough. The intensity of some teachers' feelings led to social schisms between teachers who

were uncomfortable with the daily level of animosity but even in this atmosphere of "strife, stress, and chaos," it is difficult to disentangle teachers' commitment to the Teachers' Association from their commitment to each other: even those uncomfortable with the notion of striking struggled with their decision because of its effect on their colleagues. A teacher describes how

> People were too angry to suit me. The [union] meetings would upset me and so I would choose not to attend them. And then I began feeling guilty about that. I think the assumption that if you're not at the meeting you're not committed and you don't care, I think that equalled that to them, and that wasn't necessarily true at all, I think some people felt, "You just don't care enough about us, you're not one of us. You are separating yourself."...It's a real moral dilemma for me.

Within the school, the Teachers' Association actively interceded where teachers perceive inappropriate interference by site administrators in their work. Teachers' Association representatives reflect a cadre of school leaders: current or former department chairs, "learning house" leaders, resource coordinators, chairs of the School Improvement Council, and likely to serve in these capacities again. At Rancho, "leadership is leadership," and union representatives believe that "union involvement is a rational means to solve problems." As such, union issues and the authority of the union are routinely considered in the course of school decision making and the union is a prominent feature of the school's internal governance. Some teachers and staff perceive an equation between Teachers' Association and special interests within the school: many of the Teachers' Association representatives emerge from the same two

academic departments. At the same time, salience of school administrative issues, like the power of district-Association conflict, fosters a sense of wider ownership and commitment.

Teachers may interact relatively easily with their colleagues across the school: most departments are housed in a single large building; cross-departmental "learning house" offices and a large lunch room encourage congregation. Even as the school has evolved away from its original mission of "student-centered learning" to a more standard curriculum and organization, conversations between teachers about students are routine and encourage a sense of common purpose. Teachers describe their collegial involvement as multifaceted. An industrial arts teacher:

> They're working relationships, they're social relationships during the day as well as after school hours. So it takes in all spectrums of it. ...We have a mutual student who we have a problem with. We'll get together and discuss it, say what we can do to get the kid working. [Several other teachers and I] spend a lot of time maintaining the school. ...And it works not only in maintaining the equipment but it helps the relationships working with the coaches and stuff. If I have a problem with a student who's in sports I can go out to the coach and say 'hey, this kid really needs some leaning on, let's lean on him. And how can we help to make it work better?' So it really helps the classroom situation quite a bit.

Teachers' history of access to their colleagues' social and work lives remains a viable justification for how current Teachers' Association commitments are considered, even as the faculty has become increasingly demoralized and socially disconnected. Even a non-union member is aware of her fellow teachers' personal needs and understands how

> teachers get desperate. I think to be a young teacher, or an older teacher, 'cause age makes no difference, and to be raising a family, to have a wife who may not work, to want to educate those children and send them to college, and realize that [a neighboring district] will pay $7,000 more a year than [this district], you become angry...I'm always torn between being able to do what I want to do versus doing what's good for the collective whole.

Onyx Ridge High school

Teachers perceive themselves as a loose coalition of autonomous agents within the school -- "not close-knit but professional." As a faculty they distinguish themselves from other district schools. Culled one by one from a number of other district schools to "teach at this special place," they lack the historical commonality so salient to Rancho's teachers. What is salient is the future: "teachers say they want to retire from here." What teachers have in common, however, is having been selected to the school in part on the basis of their lack of commitment to the Teachers' Association.

A number of Onyx Ridge teachers find their professional identity in their involvement in subject area-related activities not only across the district but throughout the region: the district is one of a number of sources of professional development opportunities. School and district boundaries are less salient than they might otherwise be. When a social studies teacher asserts that this school is "probably the number one place to be in city schools" and considers a nearby suburban district as his next possible career option, he is articulating a frame of reference distinct from the traditional school and

district boundaries. The district accepts applications for administrative positions from teachers who have earned administrative credentials. This option further blurs the distinction between teachers and administrators so salient at a school like Rancho. Onyx Ridge teachers seem to consider movement into the administrative ranks in the same way they might consider a new teaching assignment: as an option for an individual to "do something different."

There is little to rally against that might unify teachers. Teachers feel their professional autonomy is relatively unhampered by district policies: there have been few curricular mandates at the district level. Resources for materials, parent volunteers, and staff support such as counselors are readily available. The school administration is seen as particularly effective in shielding the faculty from "interference" from downtown. The Association representative plays no formal role in school decision making. A cabinet of department chairs, appointed by the principal, make major policy and resource allocation recommendations for the school. Where the Teachers' Association is seen as a theoretical necessity in protecting teachers from "administrative excesses," at this point if a teacher called on the union, such action would be seen as unprofessional as "protecting the legal aspect instead of doing the job they're supposed to be doing."

Teachers' commitment to the Teachers' Association appears to be made on the basis of their independent experiences, values,

and calculations of the importance of supporting an agent whose primary "good" is protection against hypothetical inequities targeted at individual teachers. The local Teachers' Association neither supports nor exemplifies important features of most teachers' conceptions of professional community. The Teachers' Association has done little to ally teachers as a group in juxtaposition to the district administration. Its campaigns for increases in teachers' salaries have not been particularly effective or salient; nor has its protection of individual teachers been frequently invoked. At Onyx Ridge, when the Teachers' Association requested that teachers "work to rule," and discontinue any work not specified in the contract, few teachers were willing to comply and many resented "anybody telling me what to do."

The school's physical organization affords few opportunities for socializing: there are no adequate lunch room or departmental work rooms. They interact through their participation on task-oriented committees; many travel to each others' classrooms to seek each other out as individuals, but there is a distinction here between "professional" relationships and other kinds of interactions. A math teachers' closest school colleagues, for example, are two other math teachers -- "One of them has similar techniques [to mine] and so we work very closely together and the other one is very different but I admire his closeness to his students." At the same time, "I don't socialize

with teachers in my personal life...I prefer not talking business when I'm not at school."

Differences among teachers are respected; here, "Your friends don't necessarily have to agree with you."

Oak Valley High School

Oak Valley teachers' professional community is based on a perception of common purpose which extends beyond the teaching ranks and beyond the school to include district teachers and administrators. The national recognition the district receives for its innovative programs and quality education is pervasive. Even those teachers who perceive the administrations' tendency to "run rough-shod" over teachers tend to regard recognition of the importance of teachers' contributions as the solution. Here, the Federation's efforts to improve teachers' economic conditions have been understood as attempts to ensure that recognition. A union representative:

> You've got an outstanding district and the superintendent says, "We have great teachers!" But they weren't paying anything comparable even to the other districts. They still aren't. We still aren't the top paid district and yet we get all the accolades.

The sense of district-as-community may also be enhanced by the suburban district's recently small size (though it is growing at a phenomenal rate, many tenured teachers recall working with teachers and administrators now at other schools), because many administrators are former district teachers, and because, within Oak Valley High, a lack of opportunities for interactions between

departments appears to foster less of a sense of school-as-entity than otherwise might exist.

About half of Oak Valley's teachers have historically been union members. This relatively low figure may stem in part from the Federation's failure to serve as teachers' champion at a time when teachers felt particularly unsupported by school administrators -- an action which might have unified teachers against administrators and enhanced the union's position as teachers' advocate. Some teachers continued to believe in the Federation's legitimacy as a defence against inappropriate administrative controls; other teachers have been reluctant to support it over the years it "antagonized" administrators during "nasty" annual campaigns around contract negotiations. The availability of teaching resources and the administrative patronage of some teachers to assume district-wide roles as curriculum developers and trainers have also probably served to mitigate some of the potential animosity teachers might feel toward administrators.

That the union's strategies have not always corresponded to many teachers' perceptions of community boundaries and issues is evident in the emergence, over the years, of two alternatives to traditional union representation. Within the school, an informal faculty advisory group takes teachers' individual and collective concerns to the administration. At the district level, the Oak Valley Colloquium is "a way for the teachers to speak directly to the administration and let them know that, all political stuff aside, these are concerns that we have."

Union membership has increased in the past year after administration and union pledged to forge a more cooperative relationship and, in the process, reinforced the notion of district-wide solidarity and increased the involvement of teachers in professional development and decision-making opportunities. While the Federation plays a limited role in school decision making, the salience of district policy in teachers' work lives makes union representatives' participation at the district level more important than in other districts . Not only do union representatives believe in their own efficacy -- "I am union leadership," says one -- but other teachers rely on them as well:

> There were a lot of concerns that the school might be going on double sessions and most of the teachers weren't too happy with that idea, and people were coming to me and saying "You're a union rep, what does union say about this, have you taken it up with the union, what's the word, make sure they know about it, make sure they knew we're not happy about it," things like that.

The school's large size, lack of cross-departmental meeting places, and strong departmentalized structure limit most teachers' daily interactions to their subject area colleagues. Teachers' comments suggests that this arrangement works better for some teachers than for others. In what some perceive as an "isolationist" environment, teachers who seek a broader professional community have begun to consider union representation as a means of finding a sense of commonality of purpose they may not experience within their own school. A science teacher appreciates "interaction with my colleagues,

especially from other schools, I like to get their perception of what's going on and what they need and what they don't need." Where she cannot always expect her school colleagues to articulate their feelings, she can take issues "to the union" and get "their opinions. And support." Another union representative appreciates the broader vision her role affords her:

> When I first came in I was a teacher, a classroom teacher, and all I knew was what happened to me as a classroom teacher. Then I became head of the department and so I learned how the school worked together as a whole. And now through the union meetings, I learn how teachers from different sites work together as a whole. So I'm just getting a wider view of the coordination between people at different levels... [There's the] satisfaction of working together with other teachers who you know are really committed to improving the teaching profession as a profession, working together for the good of fellow teachers.

Discussion and Implications

These three professional communities differ in their membership composition, the density of membership interactions, and the dimensions along which teachers find their commonality. They reveal how a teachers' union may be instrumental in helping form, focus, bound, enhance, or extend or enhance community, or may miss community altogether. Such interaction seems to require sufficient congruence between union strategies and other features of teachers' professional communities.

Teachers' unions employ certain mechanisms to ensure that they serve teachers' professional needs: the presence of at least one elected representative at each site is one; others are requirements that teachers' approval be sought regarding bargaining issues and the adoption of strategies such as strikes.

At the same time, a teachers' organization's capacity for responsiveness may be mitigated by several factors. Particularly where district concerns exist at some distance from the conditions and issues of a particular school, there may be a dissonance between union and teachers' sense of community. This is the situation in the case of Onyx Ridge. The extent to which a union is formally bound to the bureaucratic organization of schools and districts suggests that, for union leadership, issues and relationships relative to that structure and those relationships may be more salient. At Rancho, this perspective is consonant with teachers' experience; for teachers at the other two schools, it makes less sense. Teachers' professional communities may permeate organizational or hierarchical boundaries. It is also possible that, as in the case of Rancho, a teachers' organization may be overly represented by members of a particular interest group.

Unions tend to fill protection and representation niches: teachers may be satisfied with what they have, as they appear to be at Onyx Ridge, or turn to another form of protection where the union appears ineffective in addressing their professional needs, as they have at Oak Valley. They appear to be enhanced in communities where teachers experience local, cross-specialty commonality of purpose and by a belief in collective contribution to the achievement of that purpose.

These cases reveal that economic issues may have greater social significance for teachers than is obvious on the surface.

They suggest that teachers' needs for professional protection reflect their conceptions of tasks and perceptions of challenges to their professional well-being. Teachers invoke the union in response to particular situations: working conditions, authority relations, and other professional needs vary across schools and even across academic departments within schools.

In a growing number of school districts, including the three depicted in these cases, teachers' unions have quite recently become involved in forging new cooperative relationships with administrators and school board and in promoting a new wave of local teaching reforms. The new projects in these three districts are typical examples: site-based decision making to increase teacher participation in school governance; peer assistance, coaching, and evaluation; and teacher determination of training needs and professional development opportunities. These efforts are intended to foster more general local professional cultures for teaching and to support the best efforts of teachers, whose expertise is understood to be the most critical component of good educational practice (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988). While these new union-administrative alliances attempt a sensitivity to local conditions and values, there is a tendency to impose a generic new order on teachers' work lives -- to adopt a nationally popular idea like school-based decision making and mandate it for every district school.

In these districts, as in others, these district-level alliances are discovering that the new order fills real needs and

inspiring new levels of teacher commitment in some instances and not others. Given the district's long undermining of decisions made by Rancho's instructional council, the new call for site-based decision making has been met with puzzlement and some suspicion. At Onyx Ridge, the new proposals for school governance structures and peer coaching have been met with resistance: these plans have little value in the context of local conceptions of professionalism. At Oak Valley, on the other hand, the new alliance gives teachers a highly appreciated practical and symbolic entre into district life .

Teachers' unions can increase their sensitivity to teachers' professional needs by recognizing that both traditional and new issues of professional status and control differ not only across districts but across schools and across diverse forms of teachers' professional communities. They can increase their efficacy as teachers' organizations by appreciating the real diversity of teaching tasks, by offering teachers locally attractive and appropriate options for representation and professional growth, by acknowledging their own organizational limitations, and by identifying appropriate opportunities for professional community growth where they exist.

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